

TARGET!

A Fine New Book Focuses on Armor's Knights, Their Mounts, and Their Battles

Once every few years, a book comes along in our field that is truly a surprise. *Tank Action*, by George Forty, is just such a book. Forty takes us on a riveting trip through the earliest stages of tank warfare in World War I and continues his spellbinding ride clear through to the Coalition laagers in the deserts of South West Asia. His vehicle for the journey, obviously, is the tank, but he takes a track to the destination wholly unlike any we've ever experienced.

To be sure, we are taken through many battles in quite some detail. And refreshingly, not all battle tales are told from the typical "good guys" viewpoint. The operating definition of a good guy in this book is anyone who can handle the wartime responsibilities of a tank commander. The focus is not on politics, geopolitical leanings, or five-star general decision-making, but on tanking and tankers. The first chapter, "The Tank Commander," clearly articulates Forty's main idea: "Tank commanders of today possess certain qualities which are as necessary when commanding a modern main battle tank as they were when tanks first appeared on the battlefield during the First World War." Through every major war, he shows us how constant those qualities are. Dirty boot stuff, loud noises, and extraordinary behavior are what Forty wants us to understand and appreciate. He lets the men who peer at the outside world through narrow slits and small periscopes, and who pull their triggers from inside armored vehicles, tell the tales of mounted warfare through their deeds. Extraordinary tank commanders are treated as such, no matter on which side they fought. We see in graphic detail the deeds of heroic men, (and one woman!), tankers all, who single-handedly made a difference at a critical time and a critical point on the battlefield.

Of course, we all know of the epic tank actions fought in this century, beginning in WWI and ending with DESERT STORM, and we wonder if some of those histories were embellished by public affairs officers with overactive typewriters. As the Wehrmacht blitzed across Western Europe, as the Axis and Allies reeled back and forth over the bleak North African Desert, as tank formations plugged holes in the embattled Pusan perimeter, and as the U.S.-led United Nations armored juggernaut rolled into Kuwait, time blurs the faces of the men who looked through rangefinders at enemy targets and caused those targets to die for their countries. Parts of some of those big battles are here, but we already know how they all turn out, and Forty knows that we know. But we don't so readily know the names, faces, and tales of the

"Tank Aces," such as LT Norman Plough, 1SGT Shelton Picard ("the one tank task force"), LT Pavel Danilovich Gudiz, and CPT Alan Hart. But the author ensures that we do know them by the end of their respective chapters. Some of the aces are well known — General Israel "Talik" Tal, MSG Ernest Kouma, SS Oberscharfuhrer Ernst Barkmann — but the reason is because they were superb tankers. We find out through individual actions just what qualities these men — the famous and not so famous — possessed to make them perform so admirably. We see what it means to be technically and tactically proficient. We appreciate keenly the sacrifice it sometimes takes to get your cannon to the spot on the battlefield that can create an effect totally out of line with normal force ratio computations.

By studying individual tank crews and commanders, Forty dissects tank action through this century. He accurately captures the teamwork so elemental to the profession and honestly portrays the destructive power that direct fire cannons wield on the battlefield. I've been reading about tanking, or doing my own, for over twenty years and found the accounts truly fascinating. They reflected thorough research, contained many useful, easily understood maps, and were lavishly illustrated with photographs. Nearly every page of the book contains a picture, diagram, or map. The photos are one of the strongest features of this book. Even the most dedicated student of armor will find dozens of pictures that he has never before seen.

While he alters the pattern slightly throughout, the book generally sets up the historic situation, narrows it down to the specific battle, and discusses the action with a focus on the small unit or even individual tank. The account of General Tal personally "TC-ing" and gunning against Syrian targets at long range (over 10 km in a Centurion in the mid-1960s) is indicative of the type of fascinating information running throughout. An interesting feature after each of these discussions is the "Tank Ace" section, where Forty describes in detail the ace himself and some follow-up information so we leave knowing the ultimate fate of the warrior.

I found *Tank Action* so engrossing that the book had a "three- or four-to-one factor," i.e., every five minutes that I thought I'd spent with the book was actually fifteen or twenty. Every reader who is, was, or ever wanted to be a tank commander will be well served by adding this superb text to his personal library. I will.

— Major Terry A. Blakely, Ed.

Tank Action: From the Great War to the Gulf, by George Forty. Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., Great Britain, 1995. \$39.95. (Available from Zenith Books, P.O. Box 1, 729 Prospect Ave., Osceola, WI 54020. 715-294-3345)

An Excerpt from *Tank Action*:

...(Lieutenant Clifford T.) Elliott's most satisfactory single engagement came the following night when he knocked out a formidable 65-ton tank destroyer — the Sturmgeschütz mit 8.8 cm PaK43/2, known as *Ferdinand* or *Elefant*, only ninety of which were ever built. The armor thickness was up to 200 mm on the front of the superstructure, so Elliott was indeed fortunate to have been able to knock it out with his Sherman. However, it was at point-blank range as he explains:

"After we had intercepted the German column at Fleron we perceived that there were probably more Germans in Liege and that they would try to get out through the main road at Fleron.

"I set my tank at a cross street in Beyne Heusay. It was still light and I told my crew to boresight the tube. We set the elevation at about six feet. I did not want to hit the front plate of a German tank, especially if it was a Panther. My tank was about four feet from the left buildings, the street was about 25-30 feet wide. This gave me an angle of 30 degrees, but it would also put the tank or vehicle about 40 feet from our tank before we could fire. My crew and I mounted our tank and sat to wait...We waited for five or six hours. It was black as the ace of spades; you could hardly see your hand in front of your face. We then heard the steel tracks on the cobblestone street. We knew that we had some worrisome times. A tank, and not some soft-shell vehicle. The German tank would come a little further and stop. I could follow the sound on the street. I believe the German tank commander knew there was an American tank up the street. He just did not know where.

"He made one more stop and I believed I could see a darker shadow. I yelled at my gunner to fire. I could see the sparks fly. Steel on steel. We fired three more times. The end of the *Ferdinand*!"

In the eight months that Lt. Clifford Elliott served with the U.S. 3rd Armored Division, his tank destroyed over 250 pieces of German equipment, including tanks, trucks, artillery pieces, antitank guns, and even a train. He was wounded four times, knocked out of eight tanks, and received the Bronze Star and four Purple Hearts...